



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

STAG HUNTING IN DEVON AND SOMERSET.

BY THE RIGHT HON. SUSAN, COUNTESS OF MALMESBURY.

I.

IT WOULD be too much to expect of anyone, not West-Country born or bred, to feel as passionately stirred by this, the finest and most genuine of English sports, as those who from their youth have drunk deep of the exhilarating air which sweeps over the Quantock and Exmoor districts, "the Haunt of the Wild Red Deer." But, considering what hunting with the "Devon and Somerset" actually is, and that in no other part of England is their noble quarry to be found, while neither in Scotland nor in Ireland, where he still exists, is he treated like the gallant gentleman he really is, it is a matter for surprise that the sport should not be more widely known—not that we of the West ardently desire to advertise the matter, for do not the present fields number thousands on foot and horses by fifties instead of the small devoted following of former days? And among these thousands, alas! how many true sportsmen are there to be found? The question is one best left unanswered, but how anyone can condescend to run a fallow buck or a carted deer who could hunt a wild "forester" in his own spacious domain, perhaps for thirty miles, as the crow flies, across the heather light into the Bristol Channel, is more than we of the "West Country" can understand.

Writing as I am for American readers, I wish to begin by making it clearly understood with what part of England we have now to deal, and I cannot help feeling that what seemed to me a large expanse of uncultivated country must to them appear a little spot indeed. Everything, however, is by comparison, and the district where the red deer have labored free and uncon-

trolled since the Conquest—and before that time—is of great extent when the map of England is considered and the inroads of civilization are taken into account.

Looking at the two counties of Devon and Somerset and drawing a line on the map from Bridgewater to Ilfracombe, thence to Exeter, and from Exeter back again to Bridgewater, you get, according to one of the best authorities,* a rough notion of the country traversed by the deer, although they sometimes stray outside these imaginary bounds or are run further afield by the hounds. This applies to the present state of affairs, since the Quantock country has been regularly hunted and reserved to the deer, but these were originally to be found, practically speaking, all over England; then, by dint of poaching and being killed in various ways and for different reasons, the small remnant of the ancient race of foresters, or wild red deer, retreated to the remote district of the Exe, where they had a certain immunity from attack and where their depredations were of no consequence owing to absence of cultivation.

Exmoor, from the time of the Conquest, was a royal forest, which does not in the least signify a wood, many so-called *forests* being, as in this case, to a great extent bare of trees, but simply a district where the deer enjoy certain rights and protection as royal beasts of the chase, and which they make their habitual resort.

The first authentic record of Exmoor as a royal hunting ground comes to us in the form of a charter, dated May, 1204, by which Devonshire, up to certain given bounds, was freed from the severity of forest law. Ninety years later Edward I. caused a “perambulation” to be made, the results of which are preserved, and by which it would appear that the district extended further north than at present, but the boundaries to the south and west were those of the present division between the two counties. Certain other portions of Exmoor were then disafforested, a concession which meant a great deal in days when it was death or mutilation to kill or injure a royal stag, and when no one within ten miles of forest bounds was allowed to keep a hound which had not been “expedited,” that is, the ball of the forefoot cut out to prevent any possibility of his running deer.†

* Richard Jefferies, “The Red Deer.”

† These laws were in force in the New Forest of Hampshire.

These and other worse barbarities gradually fell into disuse, or were abrogated as too oppressive, until at last, in the reign of George III., an act of Parliament was passed to permit certain enclosures to be made and constituted the King's private property, giving him power to sell the rest of the land.

The extent of Exmoor Forest proper was then about eighteen hundred acres, of which about ten were made over to Sir Thomas Acland in compensation for his claim of tithe over the whole, and to certain other landholders instead of their ancient forest rights. The whole of this was bought by a Worcestershire gentleman, who endeavored, fortunately with very poor success, although he sank a vast sum of money, to bring the land into cultivation, and to enclose this large tract of barren soil, which produces little but coarse and wiry grass.

Outside this special district and in the whole of the Quantock country the hills, which range up to about thirteen hundred feet in height, are clothed to their tops with heather and the whortleberry, their sides being deeply scored by narrow valleys, wooded up to the point where the stunted tree-tops catch the biting wind, which shaves them off sharply as with a shears. Each of these "coombes," as they are locally called, has a mountain stream running down it, and here the deer come to bathe or soil,* as it is technically called, in the summer, when the heat and flies try them, or to refresh themselves during the chase or after one of their desperate fights. The sides of these coombes are very steep, and are a great test of the endurance of stag, horse, or hound. For this reason short, cobby horses are mostly used, but they must be well bred, as well as stout and sure of foot, else stag and hounds may very well run clean away from them, particularly if it is rather late in the season, and the stag, no longer so fat, is of the light galloping sort we shall presently hear of, or if a hind is being hunted.

From the top of the Quantock range of hills you look out across the Bristol Channel with the Steep and Flat Holmes, Lundy Island, farther south, and across the water Wales is plainly to be seen on a clear day. Behind you lies the fertile valley of Taunton Dean, while south and east stretch the Exmoor and Dartmoor countries. All through this part of England the forester roams unmolested at his own lordly pleasure, save when hunted at stated times, feeding at will on the daintiest fare, drink-

* From the old French term in *venery*—*souler*, to wash or soak.

ing none but the sweetest running water, a *gourmet* and an aristocrat, whose pedigree goes back, at any rate, a long way beyond that of any who have tried to prove that he is not indigenous to the soil.

I should mention that the red deer are known as stag, hind, and calf, and not, like their fellow cousins, as buck, doe, and fawn. To be more accurate, the stag is only known as such when he becomes "warrantable," that is, of an age to be run, which is shown by his head, and which he cannot be until five years old. In rare cases he may be thought fit to hunt at the age of four. The horns of the red deer are quite unlike those of any other, and the subject of their growth and condition at different periods is so obscure and so vexed that only an approximate opinion can be expressed, experts being in many cases quite at variance. I will try to state, as clearly and briefly as possible, what, in the West Country, is considered to be the rule, to which, however, there are numerous exceptions.

By the time a deer is five years old he should have what are called his "rights," that is, the *brow antler*, which is nearest the base of the horn or *burr*, the *bez* or *bay*, an inch or two higher up the *beam* or *upright* (main shaft of the horn), the *tray* or *'tres* above that, and finally *two on top*, or two points on one of his antlers. This constitutes a stag of light points—a runnable or warrantable deer, who will, in another year, have two on top on both sides and become a stag of ten points. In Scotland when there are three on top on both sides the head is termed a royal one, but I have never heard the term used in the West. Most of these words are derived from old Norman-French hunting terms, but the deer themselves are called by names which sound unmistakably English. In his first year, for instance, a young male deer is a calf, at two years he is a "knobber," "knobbler" or "brochet," from his budding antlers, a hind at the same age being called a "hearst." In the third year, he is a "spire" or "pricket," the upright beam having formed, after which he becomes a "staggart," attaining to his full titles and dignities at the age of five.

The actual condition of the head is subject to a great many variations, some of the points given above being occasionally wanting, but it is safe to say that, save in a case of actual deformity, the brow antlers are always to be found. It is with these that

the stag at bay is able to do most damage, particularly if he can succeed in transfixing his antagonist against a rock, or any hard resisting surface. He will sometimes go right through a hound's body in this way, and inflict grievous wounds on horse or man incautious enough to approach too near him. It is only fair to add that he will never attack a man of his own free will, but in those desperate last moments will always sell his life as dearly as he can.

Another element in the growth of the horns is the fact that, although they are generally born in the month of June, a hunted hind has been known to have a very young calf with her as late as November, so recently born that the hounds were whipped off in consequence. The natural constitution and strength of the animal, his feeding and any accidental injury received, either to the head itself or to any other part of his body, also determines almost as much as his age the state of perfection to which his antlers may have arrived. Up to five years, the age of a deer may be known by his teeth, but this is naturally of no use to the hunter who has first to catch his stag !

After eight years they begin generally to "go back ;" their bodies shrink, their antlers become smoother, smaller and less wide spreading, but here again the rule must not be resorted to implicitly, as a certain stag, well known to be at least fourteen years old, had a head of nineteen points. In color, the forester is a reddish brown, shading off into light fawn underneath. The hinds are a duller hue, while their calves are for the first three months of their life dappled like a fawn. Their muzzles are shorter and more pointed than their German relatives. They are altogether lighter and more graceful. That the red deer is a distinct variety is shown by the fact that the calves always come true to their known characteristics, and that they disdain to sully the purity of their ancient race by a mésalliance with either fallow or roe.

The stag is a very dainty, fine gentleman indeed ; the best of everything is not too good for him, and the damage he does the neighboring farmers would hardly be believed. He always feeds at night, and in the early morning returns to his bed in a favorite wood. This is technically called his *layer*, and here he lies snug with his head down wind resting for the day. Otherwise he always keeps his nostrils to the wind. In one night he

will do incredible mischief in a field of turnips, which he pulls up by the roots, eating only one bite out of each and tossing the remainder disdainfully over his head. He will go into a field of ripe corn, and, catching three or four ears at a time between his teeth, delicately strip them without tearing them up by the roots, and earlier in the year, when the stalks are green and succulent, three or four stags will, in one night, make a deplorable spectacle of a young crop. At one time, when the numbers of the deer became very much reduced, turnips and corn were purposely planted for them, but since the beginning of the century they have fed as they could.

In spite of their sufferings, the farmers are so devoted to the sport, which indeed could not continue to exist without their forbearance, that one never hears nowadays of a stag being shot or mutilated by them. They are, of course, compensated for their losses, but it is difficult to make good to them the disappointment or annoyance they so cheerfully endure in a sportsmanlike spirit. Scarcely any fence will keep out a stag, who will jump great heights standing, never seeming to choose an easy place, while he is very bold when in search of a favorite dish, and is not to be taken in by any scarecrow or other clumsy device of man.

So far as can be ascertained, the first pack of hounds actually used for stag hunting was kept by Hugh Pollard, the Ranger of Exmoor Forest at Simonsbath in the heart of that country, in the days of Queen Elizabeth, and his successors continued to keep up the sport till the end of the seventeenth century, after which time the history of the pack becomes that of the old Devonshire families of the neighborhood, passing from one to another. Sir Thomas Acland hunted the country at his own expense for fifty years and was succeeded in 1770 by his son, a second Sir Thomas.

There is a curious letter still existing at Exeter dated from Dulverton in 1769, written by one of the park-keepers of "Courteney Walrond" to a sporting barber in the town. This epistle gives a very good picture of the manners of the time, although it is exceedingly strange that a man in that class should have been able to write at all, for even great ladies of that date, with a name in history, were some of them scarce able to do so, while their spelling of one and the same word looks as variable as the skies under which they first saw the light. The letter in question is reproduced at full length in Capt. Fortescue's book on Stag-

Hunting, and gives a graphic account of how the first-named gentleman, accompanied by several friends and servants started at two o'clock, one September morning, and did not reach the place where they were to meet Sir Thomas and his beauties till ten—a goodly time to spend in riding twenty miles. They dined early in those days, so that, although they sat for several hours afterwards drinking deep, they may yet have been fairly sober by the time they started.

We shall never know in what reposeful ditch or half-way house these morning hours were spent, but later on we hear that “Master” and his friends “rode exceeding bold,” while from the reputation of Sir Thomas for hospitality—a fame undimmed by the passage of a century, it is only too probable that these gentlemen were but (as the writer too rashly avers) “in very good order” when they went to bed, since we learned that they all dined at Pixton* and drank “several proper healths.” I cannot help fancying that Sir Thomas’s claret and port were like himself—sound, generous and much appreciated.

I should here mention the horrible custom, which prevailed for many years, and which would certainly not strengthen our degenerate nerves, weakened by jorums of tea, or give us an appetite for dinner—the ceremony of drinking the stag’s health. This was done when the huntsman brought in the head at supper, and after sounding the “mort,” opened the stag’s mouth and fixing a quart glass of claret or port between the jaws, handed round the ghastly goblet that everyone present might honor the toast.

The staghounds of these days were very different from the present pack. They were tall, heavy and slow; they had a good deal of the bloodhound in them, with the solemn face and long drooping ears of that race, and were apt to be very much punished by a long day after what Lord Graves, who was master at the end of last century, describes as a “light galloping stag,” and which he specially recommends his successor to avoid on account of the havoc their terrific pace made with both horses and hounds, which were sometimes not fit to come out again for a fortnight. Nowadays, however, the “Devon and Somerset” are a very different breed and are recruited from almost every pack in the kingdom, most of them being simply over-sized foxhounds, drafted out of their original kennels for that reason. They get through the heather

*Sir Thomas Acland’s country-house—headquarters of the pack.

much more easily, their pace and endurance is greater, their feet less tender, and when properly handled at first and entered to deer there is little difficulty with them—except in the matter of sheep. Yes, I blush to relate it, but this is a true history, naught being extenuated and naught being set down in malice. The stanchest hound will sometimes cover himself with obloquy, forsaking the path of fame and virtue to kill a sheep.

Let me hasten to draw a veil over this damaging admission, merely putting forward as an extenuating circumstance that there is said to be a great similarity of scent between the little half-wild Exmoor sheep and the red deer, while Exmoor mutton is to my certain knowledge more like venison in flavor than anything else. There is also this to be said, that there is no end to the wiles of a hunted deer, and that when he throws himself among a flock of sheep it is very confusing to the hounds, who are, moreover, famished and exhausted perhaps with a long run.

To return to the history of the pack. Sir Thomas Acland was succeeded by his son of the same name, who kept up the family traditions of magnificence and hospitality, and who was still hunting the country ten years later. Of him it is recorded that when compelled to sleep out after an extra long run he chose out some member of the hunt to share his bed, accommodation being probably limited. The quality he always looked for in such a companion was that he did not snore. What would happen if a man inadvertently snored, I cannot tell, for Sir Thomas was a masterful man. Deer in those days were far more plentiful than they afterwards became, when they were simply destroyed out of revenge in consequence of feuds between the great county families, and perhaps for reasons which have not been handed down, besides being barbarously murdered by poachers. The pack then passed from the Acland family (who could ride for thirty miles across their own land) to the Bassetts and Fortescues; then to Lord Graves, in whose day there were two hundred deer in the country—a hundred short of the palmy days of the two Sir Thomases. Finally in 1825, after certain fat years of prosperity under the Fortescues, succeeded by very lean years indeed, when the sport dwindled down to almost nothing, the original pack was sold. This was the end of the last representatives of the true staghound in England. No doubt with them departed to a certain extent the race of sportsmen, who came out not to have a

gallop, but to watch the working of the hounds and to study and enjoy the habits of a noble wild creature in his native home, driven to use every resource given him by nature against the instinct of his four-footed and the trained intelligence of his human persecutors.

For thirty years the red deer became the prey of poachers and deer-stealers ; they were left no rest and were nearly being exterminated. Various masters tried their hands at the ancient sport, but for the most part with poor success. Harriers even had their day, and it seemed as if the last remnant of the natural lords of the forest would before long be cut off from the land of the living. Finally, in the year 1855, Mr. Fenwick Brisett started afresh with a pack of foxhounds from Cornwall, and under his able and public-spirited mastership stag-hunting prospered, deer were preserved, and the country was regularly and successfully hunted for twenty-seven years.

SUSAN MALMESBURY.